

A SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALE *EUBALAENA AUSTRALIS* (DESMOULINS, 1822) IN SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND WATERS. *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 45(2): 556, 2000:- The southern right whale is distributed around the Southern Hemisphere generally between latitudes 30° and 60°S. Like many species of baleen whales, it undertakes an annual migration from high latitude summer feeding grounds to lower latitude winter breeding areas (Best et al., 1993; Bannister et al., 1997).

In Australia right whales are found along the southern coastline between May and October. During this time calving females display strong site fidelity to certain areas (Burnell & Bryden, 1997) with approximately 90% of calvings occurring between Cape Leeuwin, WA, and Ceduna, SA (S. Burnell, unpubl. data). Whales without calves display less site fidelity and may move some distance along the coast (Burnell & Bryden, 1997). They frequently occur off the S coast of New South Wales, with reports from as far north as Coffs Harbour (30°20'S) and Cape Byron (28°38'S) (P. Hodda, pers. comm.).

This report is the first published sighting of a southern right whale in Queensland waters. At 7:45am, July 24 1998, the author observed a whale 'spy hopping' approximately 100m off Point Lookout, North Stradbroke Island (27°26'S, 153°32'E). The whale swam slowly past the point in the company of several bottlenose dolphins (*Tursiops* spp.). It lifted its head partially out of the water on several occasions displaying large white 'callosities' and a highly arched mouth (Fig. 1). The back was broad and lacked a dorsal fin. Short square pectoral fins were also evident when the whale rolled onto its back and when it breached (Fig. 2). All these features are characteristic of a right whale (Cummings, 1985). It appeared to be smaller than a mature humpback whale (many of which are observed in the area in July) suggesting it was immature (Cummings, 1985; Tormosov et al., 1998).

At approximately 8:15am the whale turned north and disappeared from view. Despite posting experienced observers on the headlands for the remainder of the day, it was not seen again.

The author is aware of only one previous sighting of a southern right whale in Queensland waters. In the mid-1950s the crew of 'Kos I', a Tangalooma whale chaser, saw a right whale near Flinders Reef at the north end of Moreton Island (26°58'S, 153°29'E) (L. Nash, pers. comm.). It was approached, identified, and left unmolested due to its protected status.

The southern right whale population is currently recovering from heavy over-exploitation from the late 18th century until as recently as the early 1970s (Tormosov et al.,

1998). As the population recovers, visits to Queensland waters by this species may occur with increasing frequency.

After this sighting, more were reported from the area. On 8 August a whale with a rounded hump, no dorsal fin, 'crusts' on its head and 'stubbie flippers' was seen again off Point Lookout by an experienced humpback whale observer. It remained in the area for at least six hours. The next day the same observer again saw a similar whale that remained for at least one-and-a-half hours. On 10 August a right whale and calf were engaged by a commercial whale-watching vessel near Flinders Reef. This encounter lasted some time and was videotaped. Species identification was unambiguous. The calf was lively and dark in colour.

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M.J. Noad, *Department of Veterinary Anatomy and Pathology, University of Sydney 2006, Australia; 2 March 1999.*



FIG. 1. Dorsum of the southern right whale seen at Point Lookout on 24 July. Callosities are visible on the rostrum. There is no dorsal fin.



FIG. 2. A breach demonstrating a short broad pectoral fin characteristic of the southern right whale.